La Cosmographie du Ravennate - Louis Dillemann, Yves Janvier

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Published in:
Speculum-A journal of medieval studies

DOI:
10.2307/2887071

Publication date:
1999

Review
Reviewed Work(s): La Cosmographie du Ravennate. by Louis Dillemann and Yves Janvier
Review by: J. D. North
Source: *Speculum*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 408-409
Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Medieval Academy of America
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2887071
Accessed: 11-12-2018 08:38 UTC

LOUIS DILLEMANN (†), *La Cosmographie du Ravennate.* Ed. Yves Janvier. (Collection Latomus, 235.) Brussels: Latomus, Revue d'Etudes Latines, 1997. Paper. Pp. 262; 14 black-and-white figures. BF 1,400.

Louis Dillemann (1899–1985) was an officer in the Belgian army who used the many opportunities for travel that his career offered to further his lifelong interest in ancient history, archaeology, and geography. His stay in eastern Syria between 1929 and 1932 led thirty years later to the publication of his Dijon doctoral thesis on the historical geography of "high Mesopotamia" in the five centuries before the Christian era and the first five centuries of it. In the course of writing his thesis Dillemann came across the famous anonymous cosmographical work composed by an early-medieval Ravenna author. A series of accidents in the last decade of his life put an end to his ambition to analyze it thoroughly, and all he left at his death was a very imperfect typescript. Yves Janvier of Orléans has at last carried through the most valuable part of Dillemann's plan, summarizing the contents of the *Cosmography* and commenting on them, although his intimate scholarly knowledge of the subject has naturally led him on occasion to change direction. Janvier has not obscured his debts to his predecessor but has kept his extensive annotations separate from Dillemann's. This separation is occasionally irksome, but at least it allows us to allocate responsibility for most of what is constructive or controversial. There is no doubt that this work should be cited under the names of both Dillemann and Janvier.

The *Cosmography* has been much studied by others, and indeed the bare bones of its history were exhibited in half a page of J. K. Wright's widely read *Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades* in 1925. Drawing on the classic cartographic histories of Konrad Miller of forty years earlier, he described it enthusiastically as "in many respects the most elaborate and interesting geographical book dating from the early medieval West" and noted that a large part of it was included in a compilation made by a certain Guido in 1119. The chief problem perceived by most of those who have studied the work intensively is that of decoding the lists of place-names, whether identifying them with modern places (in which exercise there is much scope for a type of chauvinism that Janvier exposes with a delicate touch) or trying to draw broader historical conclusions from them on the basis of etymology. The last approach was that of I. A. Richmond and O. G. S. Crawford in a study they made of the British section, published in 1949. They attempted to recover the senses of the geographical names through their putative Celtic roots and, when the names were descriptive, to identify them with specific sites. Dillemann and Janvier are skeptical of this approach, which is difficult to reconcile with research on the Continental sections of the work. As with all material of this sort, one of the gravest of all problems is that of shifting orthography in a realm where scribal ignorance of the underlying geography was very great, if not total. Misunderstood corrections become independent places; a single place might have several names; coastal towns will become islands, and conversely; and interpolations play havoc with etymological hypotheses.

Such work, in which almost every name deserves an essay to itself, is truly a labor of love. It is not an enterprise that can be easily guided or corrected or judged by rational principles—as could, for example, an astronomical work by those responsible for it. Even asking for the date of a work that clearly grew by steady accretion is out of order; and while Wright's generation placed it in the seventh century, the authors of the present study make no pronouncement. Questions as to sources are more pertinent. The Bible is cited, as are the *Liber Alexandri,* four of the church fathers, four early historians, and—perhaps most interesting—Ptolemy, Hyginus, and possibly Aratus and Iamblichus. There are references to twenty philosophers, several of them mythological. Not all references are to books: one notable source is a map, the so-called *Tabula Peutingeriana,* again expertly analyzed more than a century ago by Konrad Miller. Theodor Mommsen went so far as

to claim that the ultimate source was a lost chart, and one of the leading topics of discussion in the present work stems from the heated debate arising out of Mommsen's hypothesis. The hypothesis of a fusion of two lost charts is viewed favorably.

Book 1 of the *Cosmography* is judged to have a circular or elliptical chart as its source, "puisque les régions riveraines de l'Océan y sont disposées comme sur un cadran solaire" (p. 29). Paucity of good illustration, without which a statement of this sort is barely intelligible, let alone made plausible, might be thought a weakness of the present publication, but there is unfortunately little in the *Cosmography* that has encouraged anyone to pursue seriously what we might call the "geometrical" side of any underlying cartography. The conclusion in question is not intrinsically implausible—witness the use of words like *ascribuntur* and *describuntur* and historical precedents for such designs.

The backbone of the present work is a rich series of summaries of the listings of countries (in the sense of *patria*) and islands. Intermingled with the summaries are light editorial commentaries, supplemented by footnotes and endnotes. It is hardly possible to pass such material under review collectively. Dillemann's approach can perhaps be judged by a comment he makes at one point to the effect that the *Cosmography* teaches nothing certain about the rivers of the northwestern Germanic lands ("de l'Allemagne"). What the work teaches, however, is surely not about rivers (or lands, or islands, or places generally) at all but about words that were bandied about by ignorant people who were for the most part echoing the words of others more or less as ignorant as they themselves. It is a curious fact of human psychology that we delight in the bare act of listing proper names to which, in the absence of descriptions, no mental image can be realistically attached, names that have become steadily more remote from their earliest forms. The world is what it is called. Knowing what it is called is knowledge of a sort, but there is no semblance of completeness in the *Cosmography.* (Thus the rivers Thames, Mersey, Severn are all missing from Britain, while even the Tiber and the Meuse are omitted.) Occasionally we are provided with a thumbnail ethnographic element of a sort that has helped to fossilize the characters of nations and their peoples. The Danes, for instance, are "super omnes nationes velocissimi," the Frisians "audaces," and the Saxons "doctissimos . . . et audaces sed non sic veloces ut existunt Dani." It has to be said that such detail is rare. The work is described as belonging to the intellectual heritage of Ravenna. If that statement puts a strain on the word "intellectual," the useful double commentary on the work does much to remove it. This is a work of reference well situated within its context, and no historian of medieval geography can afford to ignore it, even though it comes at a time when such historians should be thinking more about the integration of computer databases, with their enormous potential for searching and comparing names. The Ravenna geographer would not have hesitated.

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Caroline D. Eckhardt, ed., *"Castleford's Chronicle" or "The Boke of Brut,"* 1: *Introduction and Books I to VI;* 2: *Books VII to XII.* (Early English Text Society, 305–6.) New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the Early English Text Society, 1996. 1: pp. xvi plus black-and-white frontispiece and 1 black-and-white facsimile, 1–559. 2: pp. vii plus black-and-white frontispiece, 560–1065. $125.

This is the first complete edition of *Castleford's Chronicle* (circa 1327), a Middle English verse history of the British from Brutus to Edward II, and students of medieval history and Middle English literature can be grateful that the text is at last available. Two volumes of text are out; a third volume containing notes and glossary is still to come.

The necessarily brief editor's introduction summarizes what is known about the provenance of the text. Extant in a unique fifteenth-century manuscript, Göttingen, Niedersäch-